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SUBJECT: PANAMA PUSHES DISABLED RIGHTS UNDER THE TORRIJOS  
GOVERNMENT'S NEW SOCIAL AGENDA

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SUMMARY  
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1. (SBU) In his first hundred days in office, President Torrijos has moved quickly to deliver on campaign promises to 280,000 disabled citizens and their families to create practical and inclusive institutions to boost compliance with Panama's disability laws. The president's personal interest has raised disabled rights on the national agenda and bodes well for improving the plight of the disabled. Paradoxically, despite a new constitutional amendment prohibiting discrimination against the disabled, the president's personal involvement in the new institutions may decrease their future chance for survival. President Torrijos has a disabled child and his strong push for disabled rights could be viewed as a purely personal crusade. On the other hand, his new initiatives will create a constituency for disabled rights which future politicians may be loath to try to dismantle. This is the first report in a series on the Torrijos administration's social agenda. End Summary.

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TORRIJOS PLEDGED TO INCLUDE DISABLED  
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2. (U) Prior to the May 2nd election, President Martin Torrijos stood out in the 2004 campaign for actively courting the disabled vote. In March 2004, Torrijos signed a pact with a local disabled rights group and the Ombudsman's office, promising to increase compliance with Panama's 1999 disability law, to create an office to channel government resources to the disabled, and to develop a national policy for disabled rights. Prior to taking office, Torrijos initiated a constitutional reform package that included articles prohibiting discrimination against the disabled population and that raised the Ombudsman's office to the constitutional level. Similarly, First Lady Vivian Torrijos repeatedly stated that disability issues were her top priority.

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NUMBER IMPACTED UNCERTAIN  
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3. (U) While the 2000 census counted 52,197 disabled Panamanians, activist groups estimate the actual figure to be closer to 280,000, citing World Health Organization and Pan-American Health Organization estimates that 10% of the global population is disabled. Disabled rights activists and NGOs note that five times that number are impacted as family and friends of disabled people.

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FRUSTRATION WITH LOW COMPLIANCE  
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4. (SBU) The disabled constituency was frustrated with Panama's dismal compliance with its 1999 disability law. The comprehensive law provided for mainstreaming disabled school children, the right to rehabilitation services, mandatory employment of 2% disabled personnel, and accessible new public construction. Nonetheless, since then the Ministry of Public Works has continued to build public schools inaccessible to disabled children; only some disabled children received special education; nearly all disabled children attending school were separated from other children; and health centers did not provide rehabilitation services

outside of the capital. The 2% employment requirement was not implemented and the government took no steps to train rehabilitation professionals to attend to its disabled citizens.

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TORRIJOS CREATES INCLUSIVE INSTITUTIONS  
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15. (SBU) The Torrijos administration acted quickly to form inclusive institutions to address disability issues. Immediately upon taking office, Torrijos created by decree the National Secretariat for the Social Integration of the Disabled. Located within the Ministry of the Presidency, the Secretariat coordinates and provides technical assistance to

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government and civil society efforts to integrate the disabled within Panamanian society. In October 2004, the Secretariat installed the Council for the Social Integration

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of the Disabled, over which President Torrijos presides, with the First Lady's Office playing a key role. The Council supports the Secretariat by involving civil society and government ministries in the formulation of policy for disabled residents. For example, in consultation with disabled rights groups, council representatives advise the ministries they represent on accounting for the disabled in their budgets. The Council also charges its members with boosting ministerial compliance with the 2% employment requirement.

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A PRACTICAL APPROACH  
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16. (SBU) The Secretariat is taking a practical and inclusive approach to promoting disabled rights. For example, the Secretariat's campaign to increase voluntary compliance with Panama's disability law uses a "friendly" approach to business compliance. The Secretariat is also working with a civil society group that raised \$3.5 million in a December 17-18th telethon for disabled children, including \$260,000 from Cable and Wireless. The telethon sponsors will provide the funds to construct and equip four disabled rehabilitation centers in provincial cities and the Torrijos administration will provide the land and personnel.

17. (SBU) The Secretariat freely acknowledges the existence of substantial discrimination against the disabled in Panama and the government's current inability to comply with its 1999 law. Moreover, the Secretariat employs technical specialists who understand disabled rights issues and budget realities. The Secretariat even uses Power Point to explain its national disability plan to aid in seeking international and civil society partners.

18. (U) In December, the Ministry of Education's (MEDUC's) Director of Special Education announced that the GOP's centralized school for the disabled (IPHE) would work with MEDUC to permit 3,000 of the 8,000 current IPHE students to be mainstreamed in 65 schools throughout Panama in 2005. IPHE personnel will prepare teachers at the schools to work with disabled children.

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A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT  
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19. (U) In November, the constitutional reform pushed by Torrijos's PRD party took effect, making discrimination against disabled persons unconstitutional and raising the Ombudsman's office to constitutional status.

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COMMENT  
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10. (SBU) Torrijos's courting of the disabled vote and his activist policies have demonstrated the importance of including the disabled and their families in the national agenda. Nonetheless, disabled rights are a personal issue for both President Torrijos and First Lady Vivian Torrijos, who have a disabled child. Their personal commitment and experience augurs progress for disabled Panamanians over the

next five years. Indeed, the Torrijos administration's focus on this issue has already increased national awareness of disabled rights. The Secretariat's coordinating and technical assistance function was sorely needed to increase even government compliance with Panama's disability law. The Secretariat's practical and inclusive approach is

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encouraging. Nonetheless, providing services to the disabled in Panama's remote areas remains an expensive and ambitious proposition. The rural poor are probably too marginalized to participate in the Council.

11. (SBU) The President's and First Lady's heavy personal involvement with the Council and the Secretariat also calls into question the sustainability of the new institutions under future administrations. The Secretariat and Council are not government ministries and do not have permanent status. Moreover, because they resulted from presidential decrees, the institutions may lack widespread political backing or could be viewed as merely Torrijos's personnel crusade. Finally, with the Secretariat located in the Ministry of the Presidency and the President heading the Council, the new entities could quickly become mere shells under a chief executive with little interest in disabled rights. Nonetheless, improved rights and benefits for disabled Panamanians over the next five years through inclusive institutions could strengthen the disabled rights interest group to the point that future administrations will need to pay attention.

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